

Michelle Harven: This is Force For Hire.

Desmon Farris: A deep dive into private military contracting and how it's transforming the battlefield.

Michelle Harven: I'm Michelle Harven.

Desmon Farris: And I'm Desmon Farris.

Michelle Harven: It's time for us to get to know another person from the private contracting world and get their personal experience.

Desmon Farris: I was first introduced to Evan Haffer while listening to the Team Never Quit Podcast where Marcus Luttrell and David Rutherford deliver powerful messages about never giving up. Evan's interview was encouraging and insightful.

Michelle Harven: Before contracting with the CIA, Evans served in the military for 20 years, first in the army infantry, and then as a green beret. Now, Evan is the CEO and creator of Black Rifle Coffee.

Desmon Farris: So let's listen to how he got there.

Evan Hafer: I started as an infantryman and then became a Green Beret. The invasion of Iraq kicked off in 2003. My team was actually tasked out to the paramilitary side of the CIA for the invasion. That's where my first exposure to military contractors or PMCs really began. And at that point, they had offered me a position as a contractor with the agency, and took me a couple of years to kind of figure out how the organization worked.

Evan Hafer: During that time I was still an active participant in the National Guard. I had done some other contract work for the State Department throughout that time. I was waiting for clearances to go through and a few other things, so I was training guys in Africa and Southeast Asia for the State Department. Then I went out and did some contract work for a group of current SES guys and eventually my clearance went through and I became a contractor with the agency and I stayed there for nine years where I left in 2014.

Evan Hafer: It was a fairly extensive process. It was first word of mouth, so it wasn't as if you could apply somewhere, wasn't like there was an application portal or something like that. So it was somebody had to recommend you for an interview. Then there's a phone interview and there was an in-person interview and then they invited you to a selection course. That selection course, of course, varied in timelines without saying too much. Between one day and we'll call it 30 days. And it put you through a wide variety of skills they were looking for to see if you had what it took in order to come in as a contractor, and at that point, we were doing you planning, shooting, so your planning management leadership, complex decision making, how well you could shoot.

Evan Hafer: At the end of that, they offered you a job or they didn't offer you a job. There were guys being cut all the way down to the last day. I forget how many we started with, but they'd cut roughly 50% of the people that showed up. From that point, I went to work for a company, which was a contract vendor for the agency. And then eventually I was pulled in as what's called a direct contractor for them.

Evan Hafer: And that mission set was something that attracted me. The money wasn't really something where we were sitting there going, "Oh man, I can't wait." We knew what we were being compensated for and we knew why because the economics of the situation were you're going to be paid x, but when you're not working, you don't get paid. So when you started doing your calculation, yes, it was more money than you were making in the military, but if you're injured in the military, if you're killed in the military, there's an insurance payout and that's very solidified as far as what type of disability ratings you'll get.

Evan Hafer: You don't get those things as a contractor. There's a number on your leg; so you lose a leg, you get a payout of whatever it is, \$100,000 or something like that. And obviously your leg is not worth 100,000, your leg is worth a lot more than \$100, 000. The money was not something that you could really look at. And if you were only looking at it from the money perspective, it's a very foolish and shortsighted way to look at the position.

Evan Hafer: I did over 30 some trips as a contractor. I did all told, I think I had over 43 rotations to combat zones or overseas in the course of my career. The first time I flew into Baghdad was not with the agency, it was with a group of Australians. Flying in it was much different, but I had flown civilian air into different theaters. The military flies civilian air into different theaters. That was not necessarily anything new, but then working with a civilian company in a combat zone was quite a bit different.

Evan Hafer: You didn't have military support, you're kind of operating unilaterally. It's in support of the military and everything was in supportive, either the military or the clandestine service in some capacity. It did take you a minute to figure it out like, "Okay, so we don't operate under the same rules. We don't have..." General Order No. 1 wasn't into effect, so you could crack a beer in the evenings or the mornings or whenever it was if you'd been out all night, which was something interesting.

Evan Hafer: Now we're in Camrys and vans, not Humvees or armored vehicles. But that was the mission too, which was to blend in the environment, not be seen. So we weren't rolling around in what we called heavy vehicles, we were rolling around in light, you call them indigenous or a low profile vehicles is what we utilized for all forms of transportation, which was quite a bit different because, you're used to, at least in the military standpoint you're used to just being seen and known.

Evan Hafer: We were hiding in plain sight the majority of the time. That was the objective. But that also it opened us up to being engaged by the US military because we

looked like Iraqis. The biggest fear factor in that was being in a vehicle and then also being susceptible to being shot at by the US military. That was an eyeopening experience.

Evan Hafer: I think initially you just have to get used to the American military pointing very heavy machine guns at you. I mean, psychologically that's a very difficult thing to get over. When you have an 18-year-old kid that has an M250 cal pointed at your vehicle with the ability to press down on a button and ultimately end your life, you have to get used to that. You have to learn how to navigate that under extreme conditions because we were blending in and military they weren't blending in.

Evan Hafer: But you're moving in and out of friendly and foreign lines, whether you're moving out of military bases and then operating within the Iraqi army AOs. And then you have neighborhood watch AOs and you're doing it in a Camry. That's not a feeling that you can necessarily say is comfortable at any point, but you do get used to it. And it's a very peculiar feeling when you don't have an armored vehicle, an air support; it's just you and a couple other guys in a thin skin vehicle trying to blend in and provide support in the most dangerous areas of a very dangerous city.

Evan Hafer: Those guys really taught me how to run those kind of operations because I hadn't run those operations before. I didn't have that experience. And then coming back over to the military side or the US military side, it was interesting to see you had a lot more support, you could interface directly with the military, military communications, military communication procedures. We could utilize military QRF, military air, military, military... You just had a lot more contingencies and the ability to organize an interface with the military which controlled the AO than you did kind of outside of that American G umbrella.

Evan Hafer: And so it did provide you an extra layer of psychological cover even though you knew if things go pear-shaped, so to speak, there are still several minutes out. So going over to the other side, you just had more support and that gave you a little bit more of a psychological edge knowing you have big brothers watching out for me. I can probably risk it a little bit more, push it a little bit more.

Evan Hafer: It was interesting to see the level of proficiency within the US Special Operations and their ability to do low vis work and what the Australians were doing and what we were doing. The Australians at that time, they had been doing a lot more, at least the SAS, they'd been doing a lot more low vis work than we were. So they were actually better at it.

Evan Hafer: And there was a significant learning curve as to how to operate in the environment with them but that was really good because it helped me as I went into my next position as how to take those skill sets and then operate with the American more intel side. And they did some things that were foolish. And when I say that they're just foolish in some regard.

Evan Hafer: An up-armored G5 Mercedes is not a low visibility vehicle. That's not blending in. A G5 just rolling it off the blocks without any armor is a very expensive vehicle that doesn't blend into hardly any environment except for maybe in Germany and the UK and the more wealthy parts of the country. So just because it's not a military vehicle doesn't mean that it's a low profile vehicle. But you had a very profound disconnect from, we'll call it armored purchasing and the ground truth to what we were doing.

Evan Hafer: I think there was a field of unutilized American G5s that we couldn't use. Just straight up we couldn't use them. I think they're probably rolling off the blocks they were at like five to \$700,000 a pop. You would look at that and say, "Wow, talk about the waste of the US Government and their lack of the ability to understand where we're working because we can't use any of these vehicles. And they just continued to show up."

Evan Hafer: We had to continue to work and refine the older stuff that we were using because that's the stuff that worked. You have to go in and out of friendly lines in the most, what I call it BOLO vehicle, which is white Camrys, it was a joke for us because there were a hundred light Camrys on the BOLO list for guys that were looking to clock off SVBIEDs which is a suicide bomb initiated by car.

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Evan Hafer: ... which is a suicide bomb initiated by car, right? And that was the most [inaudible 00:13:07] vehicle, but it's also the most pervasive vehicle in the country, and it's the easiest one to get in and around different areas of town without being looked at. Just going in and out of friendly lines in a vehicle that ultimately looks suspicious, because we have two to four military-aged men with beards and they look like they're, because they are, they do have kit on them underneath, it's a super suspicious looking vehicle. How you run your deconfliction is extremely significant, and then you pray that that kid isn't trigger happy.

Evan Hafer: And then that first day initiated into that, you could make diamonds in your asshole because it's such an immense amount of pressure. But then you start to get used to it. You're like, "Okay, this is what happens, this is what we do when it happens," and we just work through it. '04, '05, '06 in Baghdad and the surrounding area, people don't quite understand. That place was on fire. It was a very dangerous place. The amount of complex attacks, IEDs, small arms fire, VBEDs, SVBEDs, that were going off at that time, you just got used to the background noise, and I'm not trying to be overdramatic, but I remember looking out into cities, whether that was Iraq or Tikrit or Mosul, or Taji or any of these places, and you would just see big, black, miniature mushroom clouds, so to speak, and you would get used to the sound of things going off and you were used to the sound of small arms fire, indirect, the city was on fire.

Evan Hafer: So, that was a very dangerous place to work. It's not like driving to the office. Your office, it's the streets, and typically it's not the safe streets of that city. I've

told this story a couple times, which was, it's something that I can talk about, I was in Mosul, I forget what year it was, and we would get shot at moving through checkpoints on a regular basis. We'd either get shook down, taken out, I'd been arrested by the Iraqi police or military, so it wasn't as if this was, 90% of the time, shit would be fine. You threw up your plaques, you deconflict, you move through.

Evan Hafer: It was the one in ten where something would go wrong and we went through a checkpoint, and the Iraqi army decided to start shooting at the vehicle. We had a couple different options. You can stop, which isn't necessarily the right thing to do at times, which is, if you stop, the chances of them just continuing to hone in and basically turn your car into Swiss cheese, those are high. They could just be shooting because they want you to stop, that could be it. Or, they could say, "You know what? It's time to kill some people." Where we had gone through, they started shooting or engaging the vehicle, and we decided to keep moving and we were in the northern edge of Mosul and we were engaged all the way from the top end of the east side of the river in Mosul all the way to the southernmost bridge as we were navigating the city and alleys being pursued by, at a minimum, I think we started at two gun trucks and then we eventually, they said they had a line of probably 15 to 20 Iraqi army gun trucks that were pursuing us through the city shooting at us.

Evan Hafer: At that point, you have to keep your wits about you. I had two radios, one talking to my QRF element that was on the ground, the other one was talking to the air support that was in the air. They couldn't identify the vehicle, and the only way they identified the vehicle was the fact that they had a string of gun trucks that were pursuing us. At that point, you have to keep reminding yourself that the only thing that will put an end to this is live or die, and to live, you have to think and navigate the entire situation and the complexity of the situation, so you're not only navigating the streets and trying to make sure that you're making the right turns and moving down the right alleys because they could be blocked off, they could pitch another vehicle in front of us or communicate ahead of us, so you're navigating the streets at that time, you're navigating the problem, meaning, you're being shot at, and you're one vehicle and ultimately, air support can't identify who you are.

Evan Hafer: So we got to our southern bridge, and I knew the only way this thing was going to end with us living was to put the skids of the helicopter basically on the top of the vehicle so they would know that we were Americans and that we had air support, because air support was something that nobody could misunderstand what would happen with a group of Kiowas in-station, which was, all the Iraqis would have died that day.

Evan Hafer: So, got to the southern bridge, we linked in with the Kiowa that was on station, he basically put the skids of the helicopter on top of the vehicle, and the Iraqis parted the sea, so to speak, the Humvees that were blocking the bridge as they were pointing rifles at us, and we drove through to live another day. But one vehicle, two guys, couple radios, and being pursued through probably the most

dangerous city in Iraq, probably the most dangerous city in the most dangerous country in the world. It is a war zone. And it was completely devastated by war. It wasn't as if you're driving down the streets of Manhattan. These are potholed streets with Hescos and barbed wire and it looked like, when I first got to Mosul that city, especially on the west side as we were driving through it, it looked like something that you would have seen out of Stalingrad. It was amazing, the amount of devastation that was brought to that city.

Evan Hafer: So when you're driving through a city as a high rate of speed, it's not as if they're clean streets and easy to navigate. Just navigating the city is difficult. So I'm trying to survive, trying to navigate, trying to coordinate air, trying to coordinate QRF, all that shit goes down, then go back to the hooch and tell your war story to your buddies and go to the range. I finished off in a training environment where I spent the last year and some change teaching CQB, [inaudible 00:21:34] and a few other things and developing a selection course for guys that wanted to have my job. I was burnt out, and burnt out and angry, and I had my first child at that point, my wife had my first child. I had a conflict with a supervisor, and that conflict had basically said, "Hey, maybe it's time for you to look for something else to do." Not a physical altercation or something like that, not as unprofessional or dramatic as that, but after the time that I had had, and looking at statistics, saying, how many trips can you do? What type of father, what type of man, am I?

Evan Hafer: I was angry, I was burnt out. I really did, I was very concerned about my capacity to raise my children and be a good, when I say that, a happy, good man. I think after that many rotations and that much time, there were four and a half years on the ground in Iraq, and then I had several years on the ground in Afghanistan, the majority of my adult life was either Iraq or Afghanistan, that's what I knew. From 25 to 35 basically, those years are all blended together in Iraq or Afghanistan to the tune of about 300 days a year.

Evan Hafer: You get used to not, and this will sound, I don't want it to sound any way other than it is. You get used to the psychological agreement of not coming home, and part of that baggage is you become very callous and you lose the capacity to care for anybody other than the people that you're working with. I didn't want to be that type of father. I was very committed to providing my children with a life outside of that. Working in war is not, although it is a very admirable mission, it's psychologically detrimental, especially for long periods of time. It's psychologically detrimental. Even just the subculture psychology of working in that and the level of proficiency and professionalism that you're always on, you're always switched on, you're always ready to go, you're always competing and making sure that you're at the level or a higher level than your peers. That doesn't lend itself to an overtly happy person all the time.

Evan Hafer: I had lost several of my friends at that point, close and personal friends. I was lucky enough to have all my fingers and toes, and to be honest with you, it just felt like the right time to just try to get back to who I was, because I'm an overtly happy person most of the time. But I wasn't there. I was fucking miserable and I

was making other people miserable, I was an asshole. I can honestly say that. I was an asshole. So they had every right to say, "You should probably go look for another job." I like that. I like the fact that I left, I did the time that I did, but I pursue other things now that I think are, when I turned the page on that, I never looked back thinking, "Oh man, I wish I could go back," or, "I wish I could do this," or, "I wish I could do that." Don't care. I'm firmly committed to doing what I do now.

Evan Hafer: It's psychologically challenging. Because you have so much of your identity tied into these things. My-

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Evan Hafer: So much of your identity tied into these things. My identity was tied into my Green Beret, and then my identity was tied into, and my friends and sub-culture were tied into being in the CIA. That's your identity. That's who you are. It's your sub-culture.

Evan Hafer: So, when you decide to leave, and I'd spent about three months in the back country of Idaho in the Frank Church Wilderness Area, and just basically doing manual labor. I realized that I just didn't want to do it anymore. I just realized that this just wasn't worth it, and I wasn't going to go back in any way. I was still in the Guard. I was still in the Guard, but I only had a few months left in my contract with them. Not with my last enlistment.

Evan Hafer: I knew that I was going to do anything but that, but I wasn't going to do that again because the psychological effects of having your identity tied to a piece of clothing like a Green Beret, and then your identity tied into an acronym like the CIA, that's probably the wrong reasons. Am I doing it for the mission? And, I can say that I was doing it for the mission absolutely, but I was also kind of consumed with ... What kept me there was an acronym, and that's the wrong reason.

Evan Hafer: So, I thought about it, and I talked to my wife about it. What was the right move? I looked at going over to the DIA for a while, the Defense Intelligence Agency. Eventually, I said none of these things are going to work. They're the same thing, different jersey. I'm still playing soccer, just with a different jersey. I've got to make a clean break and just keep looking forward and not look back.

Evan Hafer: And, it was low. It was a very low, very physically and mentally draining process, but what kept me focused was just trying to be a good father. I have two kids now, but my daughter, she's five, and my younger daughter's two. I'm extremely fortunate and blessed that I can come home in the evenings after a hard day at work and give my kids a hug and talk to them about their day and have dinner with them. I'm just extremely fortunate because there are several of my friends that because they're either not here because they were killed in the war or wars or because they're still out doing the job. They don't have that opportunity, so

for me, I'm very very fortunate. It keeps me grounded. It keeps me focused on the task at hand.

Evan Hafer: I had been roasting coffee for several years since 2006 back and forth. I was actually just roasting it, so I could take it with me on my deployments. I had met Matt Bess because he also worked for the office at the agency at the time, and he had a very successful t-shirt company at the time called Article 15 clothing, and I said, "Hey, why not roast your coffee?", which I called Freedom Roast. I was looking for place too, something to transition to, and they said, "Yeah, that's sounds great, man. You should roast our coffee."

Evan Hafer: So, I roasted a few hundred pounds of coffee for them. We had sold a few hundred pounds of coffee as a reasonably good success. It wasn't like making anybody wealthy by any stretch of the imagination. A couple thousand dollars between four guys for a month's worth of work. That's not making anybody wealthy, right? It's just enough to prove the concept.

Evan Hafer: The following ... I had kind of done a couple other things, and I had two or three other jobs. When I was teaching on the range, I had a little one-pound coffee roaster, and I had my service rifle, which was a HK-416. It's on the back tailgate of a government vehicle, and one of the guys said, "You should start a coffee company. Call it Black Rifle Coffee or something." That's basically the genesis of it, which was I had roasted their coffee, and we roasted a few hundred pounds. We realized that, hey, people like to drink the coffee that I roast, and I could probably make a company out of this.

Evan Hafer: It wasn't until the first year and some change that we had the company that thought it was even going to be a success. I was working two other jobs. I had sold everything that I owned up to that point. My wife sold her house in Denver. I sold my house in Seattle. We sold basically everything we owned, and we were chips in. There was talk, like maybe we go back and try to do something additional contract work. That just wasn't an option for me. It was like a conversation, and then it was like, "no." That's not going to work. We're not going to do it.

Evan Hafer: At that point, I said, "I'm going to be a coffee roaster." I'd always wanted to do something with coffee. I was committed to it and at least seeing it through. After all that, I created Black Rifle Coffee Company, and for the first year, it was just me. Literally, it was me answering customer service requests, roasting all the coffee, packing, everything. We didn't make any money. We were just rolling it in back into the company, buying more coffee, buying bigger roasters.

Evan Hafer: Year two, I was able to hire one of my friends who's also a vet. He's still with the company, Charles Waldron, and then we really started to grow exponentially from past year two. Now, we have 143 employees in Black Rifle Coffee. We've got ... I just put in a new roaster in Manchester, Tennessee. I've got another roaster in Salt Lake City. We've got a 60,000 square foot facility in Manchester.



I've got a 42,000 square foot facility in Salt Lake, and then we've moved our company headquarters to San Antonio.

Evan Hafer: My goal is to one, become a success with Black Rifle Coffee because I think that through actions speak louder than words, so the company has to be successful in order for us to inspire a new generation of veterans who are transitioning out of the military.

Evan Hafer: Two is to hire more veterans. Right now, we're just at about 50 percent of the company is veteran, so through all these initiatives that we've launched in growing the company and starting in my garage, transitioning out of the military, it's my sub-culture and being a good steward of my environment and my sub-culture is ... There's a huge percentage of this that's driven towards giving back.

Evan Hafer: We've had a unique opportunity to continue to grow the company and hire vets and hire people that have to conform to a veteran environment. But, the other piece is just in four years, I think we've given back close to a million dollars in veteran non-profits, veteran entrepreneurship projects. We've given away tens of thousands of pounds of coffee to deployed service members, so it just puts us in a very unique position to be a positive company in the veteran community, and that's really what we try to do is we focus on providing value through either humor or information or inspiration. We really try to put our money where our mouth is when it comes to that.

Evan Hafer: We really tried very hard to run a very dignified company that's still irreverent now facing from its messaging, but internally, providing opportunity for those that ultimately will work the hardest. And that opportunity comes in multiple different forms.

Evan Hafer: Nothing is a handout in life, right? We know that. So, where we really try to position ourselves is along side of great non-profits, institutions like the Pentagon, Federal Credit Union. We've been able to work with them very closely to do a matching funds program for veteran entrepreneurs, and just for me, Evan Hafer, I like that aspect of the business, which is working with non-profits like Warrior's Heart, which is run by a former Delta Force Command Star Major out here in Texas working with the Federal Credit Union to start funding veteran entrepreneurs, highlighting veteran successes through our content, creating humor for veterans. These are all value propositions, and we're in a very unique position just to continue to create what we feel is positive value in a sub-culture that really needs a lot of positive value.

Michelle Harven: Thanks to Evan for sharing his story with us, and thanks to Stars and Stripes for giving us the opportunity to bring people like Evan to you.

Speaker 1: If you enjoy hearing first-hand accounts of contracting life, we'll be back every other episode with more personal experiences.

Michelle Harven: Our next episode, we'll be looking at the health and well-being of contractors overseas.

Speaker 2: We did survey a population of private military contractors. We found that 25 percent were screening positive for post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD, and this is much higher than what you had seen in the military population, where rates would range anywhere in the U.S. from 8 to 20 percent.

Speaker 1: Don't forget to subscribe, and while you're there, leave us a review. You can also let us know your thoughts at [podcast@stripes.com](mailto:podcast@stripes.com). Also, follow us on Twitter for updates @starsandstripes.

Michelle Harven: Force for Hire's supervising editors are Bob Reed and Terry Leonard. Digital team lead and editor is Michael Darnell.

Speaker 1: Thanks for listening.

Speaker 3: This is Force for Hire.

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